Unfold the untold: Stories of Special Program in the Arts teacher-implementers

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Abstract

Aim: The Special Program in the Arts (SPA) plays a crucial role in developing the artistic talents of gifted learners in Philippine public secondary schools. Despite its significance, there remains a scarcity of empirical, teacher-centered research that examines how the SPA curriculum is implemented within actual classroom contexts. This study aimed to explore the challenges encountered by SPA teacher-implementers in curriculum delivery, identify the strategies they employ to address these challenges, and propose recommendations to strengthen the implementation of the SPA program.

Methodology: A descriptive qualitative phenomenological research design was utilized to capture the lived experiences of SPA teacher-implementers. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with nine (9) SPA teachers representing various arts disciplines in a public secondary school in Northern Luzon. The interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and shared meanings related to SPA curriculum implementation.

Results: The findings revealed four major challenges affecting SPA curriculum delivery: (1) inadequate facilities, equipment, and instructional materials; (2) learners' varying skill levels and readiness; (3) time constraints and curriculum congestion; and (4) limited teacher training and specialization. To address these challenges, teachers implemented adaptive strategies clustered into four themes: instructional flexibility and curriculum adaptation, resourcefulness and improvisation, collaboration and stakeholder support, and professional self-development. Although these strategies reflect strong teacher agency and commitment, they were found to be insufficient as long-term solutions due to the lack of structured and sustained institutional support.

Conclusion: The study concludes that the sustainable improvement of SPA curriculum implementation necessitates systemic and policy-level interventions. These include strengthened resource provision, curriculum review and alignment, continuous specialization-based teacher training, and clear policy support with regular monitoring mechanisms. The findings offer context-specific insights that may guide policymakers, school administrators, and arts educators in enhancing the effectiveness and long-term sustainability of the SPA program.

Keywords: *arts education; curriculum implementation; phenomenological research; Special Program in the Arts; teacher-implementers*

INTRODUCTION

Arts education is a vital component of holistic, learner-centered development, fostering creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, and emotional expression (Garcia, 2020; Davis, 2021). In the Philippines, the Department of Education established the Special Program in the Arts (SPA) to nurture artistically gifted learners through specialized instruction in music, visual arts, theater, and dance. Despite clear policy goals, SPA implementation faces challenges, particularly in public schools with uneven resources and limited teacher training (Smith & Jones, 2019; Garcia, 2020). Teachers play a central role in program success, as they are tasked with delivering specialized content, scaffolding learning, and integrating the arts within broader curricula. However, many encounter difficulties aligning curriculum standards with local realities and accessing sustained professional development (Davis, 2021; Adams, 2018). While existing research examines program outcomes and conceptual frameworks, limited qualitative studies explore SPA

teacher-implementers' lived experiences, their strategies for overcoming challenges, and their responses to systemic constraints.

Addressing this gap, the present study investigates these experiences to generate context-based insights that can inform policymakers, administrators, and educators. These insights may guide curriculum adjustments, professional development initiatives, and resource allocation to ensure that the SPA's goals of artistic excellence and holistic learner development are meaningfully realized in practice.

This study is anchored in Constructivist Learning Theory, primarily associated with Jean Piaget, and in Lev Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Constructivist Learning Theory posits that learners actively construct knowledge through meaningful engagement, interaction, and reflection rather than passively receiving information (Piaget, 1970). In the context of the Special Program in the Arts (SPA), this perspective underscores the importance of experiential, performance-based, and student-centered learning processes, where learners develop artistic understanding through active creation, collaboration, and critique. Complementing this view, Vygotsky's ZPD explains that learning occurs most effectively when students are guided or scaffolded by a more knowledgeable other—such as a teacher or peer—within the space between what they can do independently and what they can achieve with support (Vygotsky, 1978). This framework is particularly relevant to SPA curriculum implementation, as teachers must continuously scaffold instruction to address varied learner readiness, adapt to resource limitations, and facilitate artistic skill development. By grounding the study in constructivist and sociocultural principles, the research interprets SPA teachers' adaptive strategies, instructional flexibility, and professional agency as forms of scaffolded support that mediate learning within real-world classroom constraints.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the policy support and curricular structure of the Special Program in the Arts (SPA) in Philippine public secondary schools, its implementation continues to face significant challenges at the school level. Variations in resource availability, learner readiness, instructional time, and teacher specialization create gaps between curriculum intentions and classroom realities. While previous studies have explored arts education frameworks and program outcomes, there remains limited teacher-centered, experience-based evidence that explains how SPA teacher-implementers navigate these challenges in actual practice. Without understanding the lived experiences of teachers who directly deliver the curriculum, efforts to improve SPA implementation risk overlooking contextual constraints and practical adaptation strategies. This study was therefore conducted to examine the challenges encountered by SPA teacher-implementers, the interventions they employ, and the systemic improvements needed to strengthen the program's sustainability and effectiveness.

Research Objectives

General Objective

To explore the lived experiences of Special Program in the Arts (SPA) teacher-implementers in relation to curriculum implementation in a public secondary school.

Specific Objectives
1. To examine the challenges encountered by SPA teacher-implementers in delivering the SPA curriculum.
2. To identify the instructional and professional strategies employed by SPA teachers to address these challenges.
3. To analyze how contextual and systemic factors influence SPA curriculum implementation.
4. To propose recommendations for strengthening the implementation and sustainability of the SPA curriculum.

Research Questions
1. What challenges do SPA teacher-implementers encounter in delivering the SPA curriculum?
2. What strategies and interventions do SPA teacher-implementers employ to address these challenges?
3. How do contextual and systemic factors influence the implementation of the SPA curriculum?
4. What recommendations can be proposed to improve the effectiveness and sustainability of SPA implementation?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of Special Program in the Arts (SPA) teacher-implementers in relation to curriculum delivery. A phenomenological approach was appropriate because it sought to understand how individuals interpret and make meaning of their experiences within a specific context. Rather than measuring variables or testing causal relationships, the study aimed to capture rich, first-hand accounts of teachers' realities in implementing the SPA curriculum. This design was particularly suited to addressing the identified research gap concerning the lack of teacher-centered, experience-based evidence on SPA implementation (Eisner, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Participants and Sampling Technique

The participants of the study were nine (9) SPA teacher-implementers from a public secondary school in Northern Luzon offering the SPA curriculum in music, visual arts, theater, dance and media arts. These teachers represented the entire population of SPA implementers in the school during the conduct of the study.

Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who possessed direct and sustained experience in SPA curriculum implementation (Yin, 2009). Inclusion criteria included: (1) officially designated SPA teacher-implementers, (2) actively teaching an SPA discipline, (3) at least one year of SPA teaching experience, and (4) willingness to participate. Teachers not assigned to SPA or with less than one year of experience were excluded. This sampling ensured rich, relevant, and context-grounded data.

Research Instrument

The primary instrument was a researcher-made semi-structured interview guide designed to gather in-depth qualitative data on teachers' experiences in SPA curriculum delivery. The instrument covered three domains: (1) implementation challenges, (2) intervention strategies, and (3) recommendations for program improvement.

To establish content validity, the interview guide was reviewed by two experts: a senior SPA teacher with extensive program experience and an education research adviser with expertise in qualitative methods. Their feedback focused on clarity, relevance, and alignment with research objectives.

A pilot interview was conducted with one SPA teacher not included in the study. Minor revisions were made for clarity and logical sequencing. Pilot data were excluded from analysis.

Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected over a three-week period through one-on-one semi-structured interviews. Most interviews were conducted face-to-face in a quiet room within the school premises, while a few were conducted through online video conferencing due to scheduling constraints.

Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes. With participants' permission, interviews were audio-recorded and supplemented with field notes documenting contextual observations. The same interview guide and procedures were used for all participants to ensure consistency.

Data Analysis Procedure

Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and reviewed multiple times to ensure familiarity with the data. A thematic analysis approach was employed. The researcher first conducted open coding to identify significant statements related to curriculum challenges, teacher interventions, and systemic influences. Similar codes were then grouped into categories and synthesized into overarching themes.

The analysis was guided by Constructivist Learning Theory and Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, which informed interpretation of how teachers scaffold learning and adapt instruction amid contextual limitations (Piaget, 1970; Vygotsky, 1978).

To ensure trustworthiness, the study applied credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability strategies. These included prolonged engagement, member checking, triangulation with relevant documents, maintaining an audit trail, reflexive journaling, and providing thick descriptions of context and procedures.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were strictly observed. Participants were informed about the purpose and procedures of the study and provided written informed consent prior to participation. Participation was voluntary, and participants could withdraw at any time.

23

Confidentiality was maintained through the use of codes (P1–P9) and the removal of identifying details. Interviews were conducted in private settings to ensure comfort and openness. All data were used solely for academic purposes and stored securely.

RESULTS and DISCUSSIONS

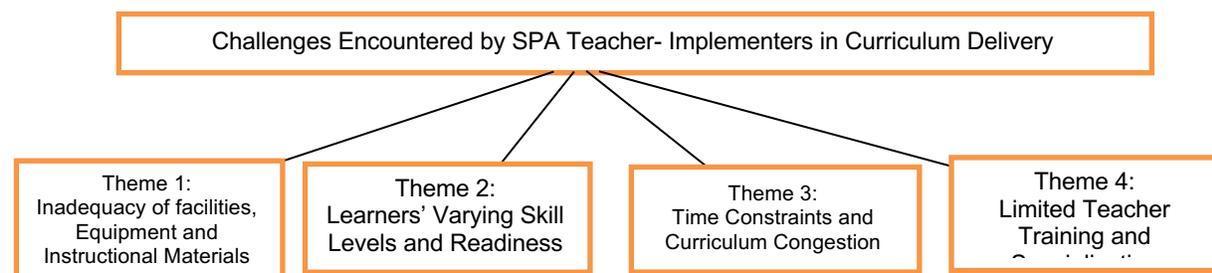### Research Question 1: Challenges in SPA curriculum delivery

Thematic analysis revealed four interrelated challenges affecting the implementation of the Special Program in the Arts (SPA) curriculum: inadequate facilities and materials, learners' varied readiness, time constraints, and limited teacher specialization. These challenges illustrate a systemic misalignment between curriculum expectations and school-level realities.

Inadequate Facilities, Equipment, and Instructional Materials

Participants described the absence of specialized spaces and tools necessary for effective arts instruction (P1, P6, P8). This limitation restricted hands-on, performance-based learning, which is central to arts education. From a sociocultural perspective, Vygotsky (1978) emphasized that learning is mediated by tools and environment; thus, insufficient resources directly constrain students' opportunities to develop artistic competencies. Similarly, Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) noted that instructional quality is strongly linked to material and infrastructural support. The findings therefore suggest that SPA implementation is not only a pedagogical issue but also a structural one, where resource inequity undermines curriculum intentions.

Learners' Varying Skill Levels and Readiness

Teachers reported significant disparities in students' prior exposure and artistic skills (P2, P7), creating challenges in pacing and differentiation. This aligns with Tomlinson's (2014) view that differentiated instruction is essential in diverse classrooms and with Bruner's (1996) emphasis on developmentally appropriate teaching. However, in the absence of structured support or reduced class size, teachers relied heavily on personal adjustments, which may lead to inconsistent learning outcomes. The results highlight how learner diversity, when unsupported by systemic mechanisms, becomes an instructional burden rather than an opportunity for inclusive practice.

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│   Challenges Encountered by SPA Teacher- Implementers in Curriculum   │
│                              Delivery                                 │
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Theme 1: Inadequacy of facilities, Equipment and Instructional Materials	Theme 2: Learners' Varying Skill Levels and Readiness	Theme 3: Time Constraints and Curriculum Congestion	Theme 4: Limited Teacher Training and Specialization

Research Question 2: Interventions Implemented by SPA Teachers

The analysis revealed four major interventions enacted by SPA teachers: (1) instructional flexibility and curriculum adaptation, (2) resourcefulness and improvisation, (3) collaboration and stakeholder engagement, and (4) professional self-development. As researchers, our task extends beyond cataloguing these practices; it involves interpreting what they signify about SPA implementation and situating them within broader theoretical and policy discourses. Across themes, the interventions reflect strong teacher agency but simultaneously illuminate structural gaps that necessitate systemic attention.

Theme 1: Instructional Flexibility and Curriculum Adaptation

Teachers modified pacing, differentiated tasks, and adjusted performance outputs to accommodate learner diversity and contextual limitations.

These adaptations were not random alterations but deliberate pedagogical decisions aimed at sustaining learner engagement and maintaining attainable artistic standards despite uneven readiness levels and resource constraints. Teachers functioned as curriculum negotiators, balancing policy expectations with classroom realities.

Within Constructivist Learning Theory, associated with Jean Piaget, knowledge is actively constructed through developmentally appropriate experiences. Similarly, Lev Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) emphasizes calibrated scaffolding to bridge learners' current and potential abilities. The teachers' instructional flexibility represents applied scaffolding—an attempt to situate tasks within learners' ZPD under constrained conditions. Existing literature on differentiated instruction further supports adaptive teaching as essential in heterogeneous classrooms (Tomlinson, 2014).

The deeper implication is that differentiation in SPA currently depends heavily on individual teacher discretion. While this demonstrates adaptive expertise, it risks uneven implementation across schools. For practice, structured differentiation frameworks and diagnostic assessment systems may provide clearer guidance. For policy, curriculum documents must embed principled flexibility rather than rigid prescriptions, ensuring that adaptation becomes systemic design rather than personal improvisation.

Theme 2: Resourcefulness and Improvisation

Teachers improvised instructional materials, repurposed available tools, and integrated digital resources to compensate for limited facilities and equipment.

These practices demonstrate resilience and professional commitment. Teachers refused to allow material shortages to entirely hinder experiential arts learning, creatively expanding the range of instructional tools within their reach.

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory underscores the role of mediational tools in learning. By introducing improvised or digital tools, teachers broadened the mediational environment within which artistic meaning-making occurs. However, literature on educational equity cautions that teacher-level coping mechanisms may obscure systemic resource disparities (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

The "so what" lies in distinguishing innovation from normalization of scarcity. While improvisation sustains instruction in the short term, long-term reliance may inadvertently shift institutional accountability onto teachers. For policymakers, this finding signals the urgency of guaranteed resource provision. For practice, schools may document and systematize effective low-cost innovations—but these must complement, not replace, infrastructural investment.

Theme 3: Collaboration and Stakeholder Engagement

Teachers engaged colleagues, parents, and community partners to enhance instructional delivery and provide authentic arts experiences.

Collaboration extended instructional capacity beyond individual classrooms, enabling performance opportunities, mentorship, and supplemental support that schools alone could not provide.

Sociocultural perspectives view learning as socially constructed within communities of practice. Vygotsky emphasized that cognitive development is shaped by interaction within cultural contexts. Partnerships thus expand the learner's ZPD by situating artistic practice within real-world cultural networks. Research on school–community partnerships (Epstein, 2011) similarly highlights collaborative ecosystems as drivers of enriched learning experiences.

The significance of collaboration lies in its potential to transform SPA from a school-bound program into a community-embedded cultural initiative. However, informal collaboration may remain inconsistent and personality-dependent. Institutionalizing partnership frameworks through memoranda of agreement, cultural linkages, and structured engagement programs would ensure sustainability. Policy support is therefore necessary to formalize what teachers currently initiate independently.

Theme 4: Professional Self-Development

Teachers pursued webinars, peer mentoring, and self-directed learning to strengthen their artistic and pedagogical competencies.

This reflects high professional agency and awareness of evolving instructional demands. Teachers recognized gaps in specialization and proactively sought growth opportunities.

Constructivist principles extend to adult learning; educators construct professional knowledge through reflective practice and collaborative exchange. However, Vygotsky's notion of guided learning also implies that teachers themselves require structured scaffolding within professional communities. Literature on effective professional development emphasizes sustained, discipline-specific training as critical for instructional quality (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

The deeper implication is that teacher resilience should not substitute for institutionalized professional development systems. For practice, schools may create specialization-based learning action cells. For policy, structured and continuous SPA-focused training programs are essential to ensure equitable teacher competence across regions.

Integrative Interpretation of Interventions

Across themes, the interventions reveal more than coping strategies; they illuminate the dynamic interplay between teacher agency and systemic limitation. As researchers, our role is not merely to recount adaptive actions but to interpret their structural significance. The findings suggest that SPA teachers are enacting constructivist and sociocultural principles—scaffolding, mediation, collaboration, reflective practice—even when institutional conditions are imperfect.

However, these interventions simultaneously expose a central tension: teacher-driven solutions, while sustaining instructional continuity, cannot fully compensate for systemic deficiencies in resources, specialization, and governance alignment. The broader implication for policy is that sustainable SPA quality depends on shifting from reliance on individual resilience toward coordinated structural reform.

Thus, the discussion reframes the inquiry from "What strategies do teachers use?" to "What institutional designs are required so that teacher expertise translates into consistent, equitable, and high-quality arts education?"
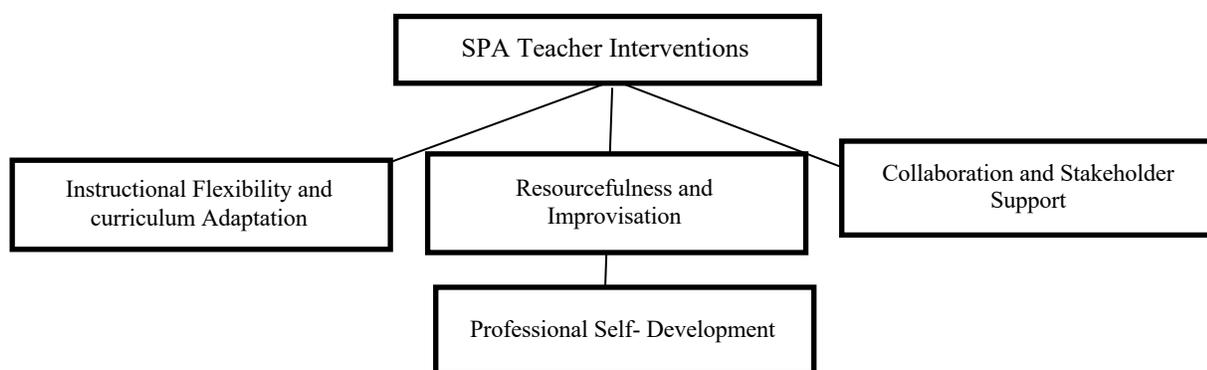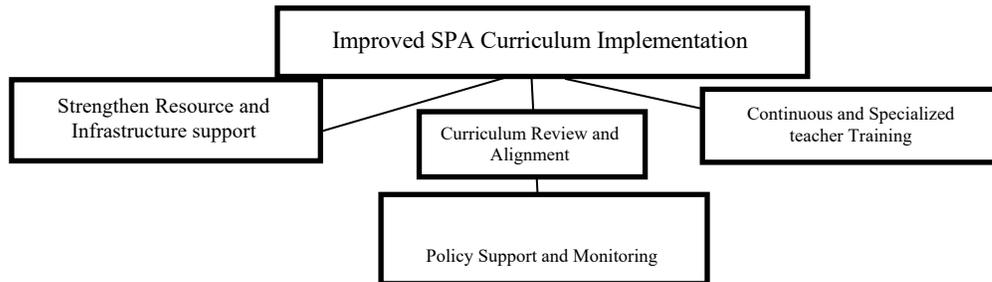

Research Question 3: Recommendations for Improving SPA Curriculum Implementation

Thematic analysis showed that participants proposed strategic recommendations to enhance the quality and sustainability of SPA curriculum implementation. Four major themes emerged: strengthened resource and infrastructure support, curriculum review and alignment, continuous and specialized teacher training, and policy support and monitoring.

Teachers emphasized the need for adequate facilities, equipment, and budgetary support to sustain instruction (P1, P6); curriculum review to streamline content and align competencies with learners' developmental levels (P4, P9); continuous, specialization-based professional development to strengthen pedagogical expertise (P2, P7); and stronger policy support with systematic monitoring to ensure accountability and sustainability (P3, P8).

These recommendations reflect Vygotsky's (1978) emphasis on the role of learning tools and environment, Tyler's (1949) and Ornstein and Hunkins' (2018) focus on curriculum alignment and coherence, Shulman's (1986) pedagogical content knowledge framework, and Fullan's (2016) principles of capacity-building and systemic reform. Collectively, these insights highlight that effective SPA implementation requires coordinated attention to resources, curriculum coherence, teacher competence, and leadership, providing actionable guidance for policymakers, school administrators, and teacher-implementers to strengthen the curriculum's quality, relevance, and sustainability

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                    │  Improved SPA Curriculum Implementation  │
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│ Strengthen Resource  │    │ Curriculum       │    │ Continuous and       │
│ and Infrastructure   │    │ Review and       │    │ Specialized          │
│ support              │    │ Alignment        │    │ teacher Training     │
└──────────────────────┘    └──────────────────┘    └──────────────────────┘
                        ┌──────────────────────────┐
                        │ Policy Support and        │
                        │ Monitoring                │
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Conclusions

This study demonstrated that SPA curriculum implementation is shaped by interconnected material, instructional, and systemic constraints. While teacher initiative helped mitigate immediate challenges, sustainable program effectiveness depended on structural support beyond individual effort. The findings underscored that curriculum success in specialized arts programs requires alignment among resources, teacher expertise, learner readiness, and institutional policy. By foregrounding teacher experiences, the study contributed context-based insights into how educational reforms are translated into classroom realities, offering evidence that meaningful curriculum implementation is both a pedagogical and governance concern.

Recommendations

For SPA Teacher-Implementers
1. **Institutionalize Structured Differentiation Practices.**
   SPA teachers may apply differentiated instructional strategies within clearly defined learning targets to address learner diversity while maintaining consistent performance standards.
2. **Strengthen Professional Collaboration through Learning Action Cells (LACs).**
   Schools may establish specialization-based LACs where SPA teachers can regularly share instructional strategies, artistic techniques, assessment practices, and contextual innovations.
3. **Engage in Continuous and Specialization-Focused Professional Development.**
   Teachers may pursue sustained professional learning opportunities aligned with their specific arts discipline to enhance pedagogical content knowledge and scaffolding capacity.
4. **Document and Share Effective Instructional Innovations.**
   Teachers may systematically document successful adaptive practices and improvisations to contribute to institutional knowledge-building and peer learning.

For the Department of Education (DepEd) and School Administrators
1. **Prioritize Resource Allocation for SPA Infrastructure.**
   Education leaders may allocate adequate budgetary support for specialized facilities, equipment, and instructional materials essential for experiential arts learning.
2. **Review and Streamline SPA Curriculum Competencies.**
   Curriculum planners may revisit SPA standards to ensure coherence, developmental alignment, and feasibility within existing instructional time.
3. **Align Teacher Deployment with Area of Specialization.**
   Administrators may assign SPA teachers according to their specific artistic expertise to strengthen instructional precision and effective scaffolding.
4. **Provide Structured and Continuous Professional Development Programs.**
   DepEd may institutionalize specialization-based training programs to ensure equitable access to high-quality professional learning across regions.
5. **Establish Clear Monitoring and Technical Support Mechanisms.**
   Policymakers may develop systematic monitoring frameworks to assess curriculum fidelity, resource adequacy, and instructional quality while providing technical assistance to schools.

For Parents and Community Stakeholders

1. **Support Learners' Artistic Development at Home.**
   Parents may provide encouragement, time, and logistical assistance to sustain students' engagement in artistic practice.
2. **Strengthen School–Community Partnerships.**
   Community members and local cultural organizations may collaborate with schools to provide authentic performance venues, mentorship opportunities, and supplemental resources.
3. **Advocate for Sustainable Support of SPA Programs.**
   Stakeholders may participate in initiatives and partnerships that promote resource generation and long-term sustainability of arts education programs.

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